DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 051 732 HE 002 179

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TITLE	[The City University of New York's Open Admissions Program: A Reply to an Article by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak.]
INSTITUTION	City Univ. of New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE	4 Jan 71
NOTE	12p.
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Standards, Admission (School), *College Admission, Compensatory Education Programs, *Disadvantaged Youth, Educationally Disadvantaged, Equal Education, *Higher Education, *Open Admissions
IDENTIFIERS	*City University of New York Open Admissions Policy

ABSTRACT

This letter from Seymour Heyman, Deputy Chancellor of the City University of New York, answers on a point-by-point basis the criticism leveled against the open admissions policy of CUNY by Evans and Novak in an article in the Washington Post. The letter identifies "the utterly baffled freshman" as a newly arrived student from Greece with good academic credentials, and argues that: (1) of the 35,000 admitted students, half were found to need remedial education, but only 9,000 of these would not have been admitted under pre open admissions policy (OAP) criteria; (2) almost 80 percent of the entering freshmen had a B average or better in high school, better than the national average; (3) the decision to advance the OAP from 1975 to 1970 was not just the result of radical student pressure, but also at the urging of all non-radical groups on campus; (4) academic standards have not been lowered; (5) the cost relative to the potential benefit is low; (6) new constituencies can be reached without sacrificing instructional quality; (7) academic standards at CUNY mean the rate and effectiveness of knowledge transmission, and not the students' scholastic track record or the faculty's scholarly prestige; (8) the majority of freshmen are white; and (9) that the faculty continue to support open admissions. (AF)

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Washington Post 12/24/70

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

The Wrecking of a College

NEW YORK—Utterly baffled by the profundities of first-year history at City College of New York (CCNY), a newly enrolled freshman this fall told his professor he simply could not make sense out of the textbook "because too many words are just too long."

Such a heart-rending incident could not have occurred in years past. Such a student would have been academically ineligible for CCNY, the tuition-free college ranking among the nation's best liberal arts schools. Under the new open-admissions policy, however, anybody in the city with a high school diploma can enter City University of New York (CUNY), a sprawling educational complex of junior and senior colleges (including CCNY) and graduate schools.

Although CUNY's administrators deny it, faculty members complain the incident of the bewildered freshman is commonplace. Thus, the preliminary estimate of critical faculty members is that the quality of instruction is declining and will continue to decline. "To be perfectly frank," history Professor Howard Adelson told us, "there are indications that this college is finished as a learned institution."

The avowed reason for open admissions is that a tax-supported institution must provide service for *all* the city's residents, regardless of qualification. The harshly practical reality, however, is that student radicals at CUNY would have blown the lid off the school if the policy had not been adopted. Moreover, some administrators privately praise the policy for an entirely different reason: taking slum youth off the street.

Thus, two grave questions of public policy are raised at CUNY with applications across the country: Is the enormous expense of higher education the best way to care for semi-literate high school graduates who might otherwise drift into crime? And is the high price of drastically lowered academic standards really necessary to achieve this goal?

THE FINANCIAL cost is staggering. The burden of CUNY's 15,000 extra students under open admissions adds another $20 million to the $320 million annual budget without even providing space for the enlarged enrollment. Soon, the annual cost of CUNY will be $1 billion, to be borne by a society reaching the upper limits of its tax burdens.

But the academic cost is even more disturbing. CUNY administrators stress that unqualified freshmen are given remedial courses in reading and arithmetic. The flaw in the program is that the student receiving remedial reading can also take regular courses in history, science, or economics, drastically impairing the level of instruction.

Certainly, the end is near for CCNY as an "elitist" institution where sons and daughters of the poor could obtain a free education of Ivy League caliber. "I think the conception of academic standards is going to change," CUNY Deputy Chancellor Seymour Hyman told us.

Indeed, the concept is changing radically right now. The Negro or Puerto Rican youth, given a diploma in New York City high schools without regard to ability to read or write, will not be flunked out automatically at CUNY. An informal arrangement proposes that new students not be flunked out until after 1½ years, giving everybody a two-year free ride.

BUT WORRIED faculty members fear that the two years may stretch to four, and the CUNY degree will become as meaningless as a New York City high school diploma. Hence, the formulation of classics Professor Louis Heller: "Open enrollments—a political device for conferring a college degree without giving a college education."

Just how many faculty members agree with Heller is impossible to determine. Critical professors described for us a climate of fear, based on actual death threats to faculty members, professors beaten up in their classrooms in the violent spring of 1969, and a rising tide of student power giving students influence over the professional futures of the faculty. Thus, silence is understandable.

But such absence of criticism cannot deflect national academic attention from what is happening at CUNY and particularly at CCNY. In the months and years ahead the cost to higher education of egalitarianism run wild may be incalculable.

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The City University of New York Office of the Deputy Chancellor

535 East 80 Street, New York, N.Y. 10021
212/360-2151

January 4, 1971

Mr. Robert Novak
Suite 1312
1750 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20006

Dear Mr. Novak:

It might come in the category of the glass-jawed contender, demanding another round as he's carried from the ring after a first minute k.o., but I want to invite you back for another look at City University's Open Admissions Program (OAP).

So much is at stake, involving enormous investment in human effort as well as fiscal resources, that I would not want you or your readers to long labor under the impression that OAP at CUNY is "egalitarianism run wild," destined to yield "lowered academic standards."

My request for your continued attention may, as some advise, be counter-productive in generating another column highly critical of CUNY's goals and operations. As no expert in journalism or the media, but as a more than occasional reader of your column, I am inclined toward relying upon your desire to provide your thoughtful audience with the broadest possible clear view of issues you regard as sufficiently important to warrant their attention. I shall attempt to support my request with the following observations, relating them as best I can to the sequence of your published report. This will be rather lengthy, so I pray your indulgence.

Paragraph 1 - the "utterly baffled freshman"

I am sure the case is accurate, and I would judge there are other CUNY freshman who also find themselves unable to make sense of standard college text material.

However, I wonder whether the faculty member at City College who gave you this example mentioned that the student in question could by no stretch of the imagination be considered typical of open admissions freshmen. He is an immigrant from Greece who arrived in this country after completing

his secondary education in his native land. His academic record was such to have easily earned him admission to CUNY under the highest standards required in past years. This case was discussed at much length within the City College History Department whose chairman provided you with other opinion regarding open admissions which I will discuss below.

Incidentally, this student was shifted some time ago from the standard freshman history course in which he was enrolled and, understandably, floundering to a special course entitled American History for Foreign Students.,

More years ago than I prefer to count, I too was a freshman (albeit fairly fluent in English) on the City College campus. Thanks to my family and the preparation I had received in secondary school, I suppose that I was considered what we now regard as a "high achiever," ranking close to the top of the graduating class of a fairly good high school. But I too can recall occasions of bafflement during that freshman year as I wrestled for the first time with college level texts. Other colleagues, whose undergraduate days were spent at other (rather prestigious) institutions, remember equally vexing experiences as they attempted to comprehend the more sophisticated vocabulary of collegiate texts. Those with whom I discussed this have since earned their doctorates and have made significant scholarly contributions in their respective fields. This might be attributed to their personal intellectual capabilities or to their academic diligence. It also may have been the consequence of their relationships with gifted and sensitive faculty members and how those teachers responded to freshman perplexities.

As an educator I am delighted that a CUNY freshman would take his problem to a member of our faculty rather than sulking from the class in frustration. What most concerns me is the response of the faculty member. Did he take the time to suggest a proper course of action for the confused student? Did he review his record and make an evaluation leading to a course shift, or perhaps counselling him into a remedial course or a tutor? The feedback we receive at 80th Street, and my discussions with administrators and faculty members on CUNY campuses, indicate that corrective counselling in such cases is more the rule than the exception.

While a venture of this magnitude is bound to have errors, the critical point of appraisal should be whether those who planned it, and those responsible for its implementation, have anticipated probable areas of error and developed correcting mechanisms. On the specific point of mis-scheduled students (those under or over qualified for courses or programs in which they are enrolled), OAP planning - from policy decision by the Board of Higher Education to curriculum planning, freshman orientation, faculty recruitment, indoctrination and training - lays heavy emphasis upon lateral mobility of students within and among CUNY colleges and their broad array of regular as well as special academic programs.

These plans are being implemented. On the specific campus you cited, City College, of the 2,400 open admissions freshmen, 277 have had their course programs changed since classes began as a result of individual academic evaluations (by the college deans as well as faculty members) and counselling. Every freshman's high school record and CUNY entrance test results were evaluated by college administrators responsible for academic placement. Most were completed prior to assignment of classes. Some errors were made and, from the statistics, we estimate most were identified and resulted in course changes. Some errors may continue to be made with the result of a few students being grossly misplaced. But the overall verdict at City College as well as our other campuses is that the margin of error is less this year than before OAP. The reason is that OAP spurred us to improve our screening procedures and to initiate better mobility procedures so that adjustments could be made earlier in the freshman's career, when there is higher probability of academic salvage. For example, this is the first year that every freshman received a CUNY academic aptitude test before registration at one of our colleges.

Much more central to the problem is the response of the faculty member to his own teaching methods, including text selection. I know of no reputable educator who would contend that instructional methods (any more than content) must remain static. Each year's freshman class is part of its own time and, OAP aside, the effective faculty member should adjust accordingly.

We knew - and our faculty knew - before they arrived that the OAP freshmen would be somewhat different from their predecessors. But the difference was not nearly as much as our more ardent supporters or severest critics would have the public believe. Which leads me to...

Paragraph 2 - the illusion of radical change

As noted above, the "heart-rending" incident is not unique to CUNY nor to OAP. Many of those eligible under prior criteria for CUNY admission experienced the same freshman bewilderment.

Rather than rely upon the traditional image of the confused frosh, let us take a cut at trying to quantify the degree of change in CUNY's freshman class.

We admitted 35,000. All were tested (for the first time in CUNY history), using standard academic achievement criteria. Approximately half were found in need of basic academic remediation in varying degrees. But only 9,000 of those who were admitted would not have been eligible for matriculation under pre-OAP criteria. And, according to the test results, some enrolled who would have been denied admissions under prior standards but were found to be adequately prepared for college level work.

Thus, almost 30 percent of those who would have been eligible under former admission standards were found to require some degree of remediation. From this, it is logical to assume that the screening criteria (high school grade average) of previous years were similarly flawed. There is evidence to substantiate that assumption.

How was this handled before and how is it being handled under OAP? Voluntary tutorial programs have long been in operation at CUNY colleges. Many students took advantage of them and profited thereby. Others did not and became academic casualties. The difference under OAP is that the student's judgment of his academic insufficiency is now buttressed by data providing early warning to his faculty members and counselors. Also, assignment to remedial classes and/or tutoring assistance becomes mandatory.

For more than half a century the colleges of the university have operated schools of general studies, evening sessions where students unable to meet CUNY college entrance requirements were enrolled in regular courses. Even without the counselling now available to our OAP freshmen, tens of thousands of these night students earned matriculation after several semesters by demonstrating their ability to take and pass standard CUNY college courses. Many of our most distinguished alumni followed this route. But there were many more who dropped out. How many were lost because they did not have the opportunity to move to less demanding curricula in other subject areas where they could have received preparation for more arduous study? How many because remediation and counselling were not available? We do not know the answers, but we do know there was an enormous loss in human talent which our society will never recover.

Paragraph 3 - the decline in the "quality of instruction"

Is the "bewildered freshman" as commonplace as some would have us believe? Let's examine the campus from whence this emanated. At City College, 79.4% of the OAP freshman class enrolled with high school academic averages of "B" or better. This compares with a national freshman average for four-year colleges of 63.4%, according to the American Council on Education statistics, the most comprehensive available.

Only 1.6% of the OAP freshmen who entered City College had high school academic averages of "C" or below. This compares to a national average for four-year colleges of 7.2% freshmen entering with "C" or below, according to the A.C.E. The balance, incidentally, fall in the "B-" or "C+" categories.

If we were to assume that the quality of instruction is dependent upon the prior academic average of incoming freshmen, based upon the A.C.E. data, City College is still far above the national average.

But I do not - nor do most of my colleagues at CUNY - concede for a moment that the quality of instruction is determined, either wholly or significantly, by the prior academic status of incoming freshmen.

With freshmen, as with upperclassmen and even graduate students, the quality of instruction is overwhelmingly decided by the capability, diligence and dedication of the individual faculty member. I would not go so far as one of our former White House occupants who allowed that all a great university needed was an attentive student on one end of a log and a Mark Hopkins-type on the other; but individual teaching talent is still an enormous part of what makes up institutional academic quality.

If our faculty calibre is declining because of OAP, it certainly is not because we are unable to retain scholars who have proven their teaching and research capabilities. The outflow of tenured faculty members is less now at CUNY than heretofore and far below the national average. More significantly, at no point in the history of our colleges have we received more applications, from more qualified scholars, than we have this year. New York City is still a mecca for highly motivated academics and OAP, rather than a deterrent, is cited in countless interviews and in letter after letter of application for CUNY faculty appointment as the specific reason for wanting to teach at one of our colleges. The academic community, it would seem, is more "turned on" than "turned off" by the prospect of a public urban university that has shown its resolve to use higher education as a more important tool in elevating the quality of life in its city.

As to the quotation from Professor Adelson, I am again sure of your accurate reporting since it is almost identical to the language he used in opposing OAP, in hearings held long before OAP was a policy decision of our trustees. While a department chairman, Dr. Adelson's own classroom experience with OAP freshmen is nil. He teaches one graduate course. Although I have listened attentively to his many presentations in opposition to OAP, neither I, the majority of his colleagues in the University Faculty Senate, nor those on the City College campus share his conclusion. The same has not been altered by his ardent political efforts, his statements on the electronic media and his many declarations to the press. Absent any evidence to the contrary, I would say that Professor Adelson's observations would tend to fulfill his own dire prophecies of more than a year ago.

Paragraph 4 - "student radicals..would have blown the lid off"

I'm afraid your opening sentence can be misleading. The university does try to be of service to all the city's residents, but it does not offer admission to all "regardless of qualification."

OAP criteria are essentially: residence in the city, a recognized diploma from high school (June 1970 or thereafter), and a motivation to continue education. Almost every recent objective evaluation of college admission

procedures has found nationally that past criteria have undervalued motivation. Our own past six years of experience with SEEK and College Discovery (programs aimed at disadvantaged students, inadmissible under prior academic criteria) has demonstrated that significant numbers - as high as 50% - of young men and women with relatively poor high school records, if properly motivated, can succeed at college.

That CUNY "student radicals" had input into our trustees' decision to advance OAP from 1975 (its original implementation target year) to 1970 is true. But so did non-radical students and non-radical faculty and non-radical public leaders and organizations. The University Student Senate and the University Faculty Senate testified and petitioned in favor of advancing OAP to 1970, when it was being considered by our Board in 1969. The two faculty collective bargaining organizations (CUNY Legislative Conference and the United Federation of College Teachers) both urged OAP implementation in September 1970. So did all three 1969 mayoral candidates. Others included the American Jewish Committee, the NAACP, the New York AFL-CIO, the Catholic Interracial Council and many other organizations representing about as broad a cross-section of this city as can be gathered. The decision was also endorsed by Governor Rockefeller, the New York State Board of Regents and the Joint Legislative Committee on Higher Education which held long and exhaustive hearings (at which Professor Adelson also testified) prior to OAP's implementation.

The fact that a radical demand (not for OAP) was made by disruptive groups on one of our campuses, and that demand helped to influence the Board to act, should not be something for which CUNY is criticized. Virtually every examination of campus unrest - including the President's commission under Governor Scranton and the New York State commission under Assemblyman Henderson - has concluded that a primary cause of disruption has been failure of administrators and trustees to listen and to heed legitimate grievances.

The fact that CUNY takes "slum youth off the street" is neither new nor deplorable. In my day City College did the same thing. I know of none who returned to inhabit them, but I know several of my fellow alumni who have played key leadership roles in helping to eliminate the slums from whence they came.

Paragraph 5 - "drastically lowered academic standards"

My response to this is partially covered by the data I offered in regard to your Paragraph 3. It might also help illuminate what was planned, and what is in process at CUNY, if I described the method of allocating OAP students within CUNY.

Admission to our senior colleges, based upon standards set by the Board of Higher Education, requires that a prospective freshman brings with him a high school grade average of 80 or above (two grade points from what it

would have been without OAP) or be in the top half of his high school graduating class. This does not include SEEK students, who are in a special program and have long been admitted under other criteria.

Those who fail to meet either of those two requirements, and who want to enroll at CUNY, are guaranteed admission to one of our two-year community colleges where they are enrolled in two-year programs leading to a terminal associate degree or third-year transfer to a senior college following completion of the prescribed course material.

Interestingly, more students eligible for senior college than we anticipated, opted for community college admission. We found incoming freshmen more sophisticated than we had assumed about the high quality of instruction and the two-year programs at our community colleges, rated among the best in the nation.

A few - an exceedingly few - of our incoming freshmen could be classified as "semi-literate." But granted that they exist, and some may have, as you write, otherwise have drifted into crime. Is this, in itself, bad public policy? Not from the fiscal viewpoint when you consider that CUNY's per-student cost to the public treasury is about $2,000 a year and the best available cost for those engaged in crime is many times that figure...and those apprehended and sentenced to penal institutions in New York State each cost the taxpayers in excess of $10,000 a year! There is also the consideration that the youngster moving toward crime might have his course altered by a college counselor, teacher or the campus environment itself. I know of at least one student (who went through our SEEK program) who was a convicted felon and had his lifestyle significantly altered by exposure to CUNY. He is now a doctoral fellow at Harvard University and I would be happy to furnish you with an introduction to him.

Paragraph 6 - "staggering" costs

Ours is a mini-moonshot. I doubt the $20 million that OAP cost this year would cover the price we paid for the gaskets alone that brought man to the moon. But I firmly believe the venture upon which we are embarked will be just as significant in lifting the quality of life for those who inhabit this planet as were the multibillion investments we made (and I refer only to that contributed by New York State taxpayers) at Cape Kennedy or Houston. That is why I am engaged in writing to you on this New Year's weekend. It is why we have been able to hold and attract gifted faculty and more gifted students than ever before applied for admission to CUNY. "Gifted" is based upon the old academic criteria; we enrolled more from the city's top high schools than ever before.

Yes, by 1980 the CUNY budget will reach a billion. But if OAP succeeds, the public resources to pay that bill will be immeasurably more than they are today...both from vastly increased incomes of those who complete their higher education and - perhaps equally significant - the number

whose encounter with CUNY will mean that they are not inexorably swept into the welfare whirlpool as they would have been, absent OAP.

Paragraph 7 - "the academic cost"

You are correct when you report that some students with inadequate academic preparation are taking "regular courses." Most, as noted in my response to your first paragraph, have been shifted. Others are in process. Some will simply flunk, nowhere near the 40-to-50% "flunkees" at many of our most prestigious institutions where such flunk-out rates have long been accepted without visibly impairing the level of instruction.

The virtue of OAP is that the likelihood of an academic misfit is reduced... and the chances of successful readjustment are greater.

Let me cite two examples of CUNY academic adjustment with which I am personally familiar. Both are at City College; both involve the Chemistry Department which, incidentally, has long ranked among the nation's finest in that discipline.

College chemistry has traditionally been a major barrier for incoming freshmen. The faculty could have taken the position that, based upon its national reputation, the chemistry department would just continue with the same instructional methods and texts that it has always used and let students who can't pass simply be failed.

But they didn't. And the results are described in the December 7 issue of Chemical & Engineering News where the reforms generated by Professor Abraham Mazur (the department chairman) and his colleagues are expanding the scope of chemistry curriculum while making it more manageable for more students, including significant numbers of OAP freshmen with undistinguished secondary school science preparation. If enhanced academic quality is possible while adapting to the needs of underprepared students in the City College Chemistry Department, it would be difficult for me to find a campus or discipline that could validly challenge the feasibility of such an undertaking.

The other example, related to what Dr. Mazur is doing, involves a retired City College chemistry professor, Dr. Frank Brescia, who is co-author of one of the most respected and popular freshman chemistry texts in the country. He is now travelling the nation, at his own expense, interviewing college and secondary school chemistry teachers as well as remedial teachers, seeking ways to improve his textbook by enhancing its academic content while making it a more useful tool for students who were not adequately prepared for freshman college chemistry.

These are specific examples of distinguished academics who understand the philosophy central to OAP - that the university can change to reach new constituencies without sacrificing - and even while enhancing - its instructional quality.

Paragraph 8 - "the end is near for CCNY"

I did tell you during your visit that "I think the conception of academic standards is going to change." But I went on to point out that academic standards have never been the precise measure some would have us believe. Some conceive of academic standards as the relative scholastic track record of those admitted. Others see it as the scholarly prestige of the faculty, measured by degrees, publications and research accomplishments. I like to think of academic standards for CUNY as the rate and effectiveness of knowledge transmission. Under OAP we come closer to quantifying that than ever before because of the built-in evaluation designs that are now being implemented and which will be feeding back the critical data as we go on to the second semester and second year of this undertaking.

A good part of standards, as I see it, has to do with the transmission line generating new arteries as the student progresses through college and, more important, after he leaves so that it goes on as long as the mind lives.

We need new techniques to encourage this phenomenon. The old ways must change and they have been changing, at an ever-increasing rate, before OAP became a reality. New models of academia, initiated by faculty, have been springing up all over the landscape, here and abroad. Some have been found to work; others have not. Many have influenced the mainstream and have raised the standards of performance for higher education. Hutchins' "great books" experiment at Chicago was hailed by many as a disaster. It wasn't. Morgan's co-op plan for Antioch was expected by many to blunder. It became a model. The old academic bastions of lecture instruction, grades, win-lose tests...all have been successfully assaulted in one way or another by faculty and administration innovators to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for keeping the university's eye critical of its own performance as well as what transpires around it.

Paragraph 9 - "Negro or Puerto Rican youth"

OAP is not a venture aimed exclusively at the disadvantaged minority youth of our city. The fact is that most of the freshmen who arrived at CUNY under OAP are white, by a ratio of about 3-to-1. It seems the general image of the urban disadvantaged is non-white, but the vast majority in New York are still Caucasian.

As the OAP charge from our trustees said, it is not to be a "revolving door," taking in disadvantaged students as freshmen and automatically flunking them out the next semester or next year.

But no student should be getting a "free ride" for three semesters, or two or one. More than most people realize, the best guarantee of that is the students themselves. More youngsters dropout than are flunked out. If

nothing else, youth is a time of impatience and few freshmen or sophomores are willing to just "do time" on a college campus...especially if they come from homes in which their contribution to family income is sorely missed... especially on crowded CUNY campuses which are a far cry from the luxurious greensward most imagine college to be. You correctly reported that our facilities are inadequate. They are hardly a place where one would choose to loaf.

Paragraph 10 - "worried faculty members"

Again you name a member of our "worried" faculty. Professor Heller has about as much classroom experience with OAP freshmen as his colleague, Professor Adelson. He teaches one undergraduate course in which freshmen can be enrolled. In fact, among his other students in that particular class are 11 freshmen. The course is Linguistics. If any of those 11 freshmen fit the description of lacking "ability to read and write" (as in your Paragraph 9) I would be very surprised. Without having checked their high school averages, I would be willing to wager that every one had a high school grade average above pre-OAP criteria for City College admission.

And, as to Professor Heller's perception of OAP being "a political device for conferring a college degree without giving a college education," I do not recall a student who finished one of Dr. Heller's courses awarded a passing grade without having done passing work, as certified by his professor. Nor would I expect that practice to change for Professor Heller who obviously perceives himself as conscientious in meeting his academic responsibilites. He should be no less generous in his opinion of his faculty colleagues whose academic qualifications are no less distinguished than his.

Like Professor Adelson, the sentiments you attribute to Dr. Heller can be found in his public testimony of 1969 when he inveighed against implementation of open admissions. Again, a good case of the self-fulfilling prophesy distorting reality.

Paragraph 11 - "how many faculty members agree"

The ones described as "critical" relate violent incidents which took place before OAP happened. Others, who you did not have occasion to meet during your visit, are all represented in the University Faculty Senate as well as by either of the two faculty collective bargaining organizations. None have asked for an OAP rollback. All continue to support open admissions; all seek improvement in its implementation as do those of us who are university administrators.

The only "rising tide of student power giving students influence over the professional futures of the faculty" that I have seen, has been the vote at Hunter College (which included faculty as well as students), endorsing a new governance plan which formally allows a joint faculty-student committee to evaluate individual faculty performance. This is far from unique in American higher education and, if productive at Hunter, will hopefully be considered at other CUNY colleges.

I might also point out that the violence which occurred before implementation of open admissions involved a small minority of ultra-militant students and non-students. The remnants of that faction (which demanded an ethnic quota system of admissions - rejected by the Board of Higher Education) opposed and continue to oppose OAP as avidly from their extreme as do Professors Adelson and Heller from their vantage point.

Paragraph 12 - your conclusion

You have been very patient to read this far. Allow me to again extend our invitation in hope that the verdict will be reversed on the basis of more complete evidence.

Cordially,

Seymour C. Hyman
Deputy Chancellor

SCH:plb